

The China Diary

**A Brief Comment on the Spiritual Dimension of George H.W.
Bush's tenure in China according to The China Diary.**

By

Kjell O. Lejon, PhD, TD
Professor of Religious Studies
Linköping University
Sweden

© Kjell O. Lejon, 2012

Linköping Studies in Religion and Religious Education, No 6
Linköping University Electronic Press
ISSN 1404-3971

The China Diary

A Brief Comment on the Spiritual Dimension of George H.W. Bush's tenure in China according to the China Diary

Introduction

In his preface of *The China Diary of George H. W. Bush*,¹ Bush states that he and Barbara craved for a change—more than ever in their lives—during his latter time as chairman of the Republican National Committee (RNC). This craving for change seems to a great extent have been caused by the fact that Bush had spent much time having to deal with what he calls the “ugliness” of the Watergate Scandal. They wanted out of Washington; they wanted “a new adventure and a new challenge,” as Bush himself puts it.²

After Nixon had been forced out of office—he resigned on August 9, 1974—the non-elected sworn-in President Gerald Ford offered Bush an ambassadorship, either in London or Paris, apparently very prestigious diplomatic

¹ *The China Diary of George H. W. Bush* is edited by Jeffrey Engel, professor of history and public policy at Texas A&M.

² *The China Diary* (2008), xiii.

positions. To the surprise of both President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Bush instead asked if he could be appointed as the head the United States Liaison Office in Beijing—He knew that the veteran diplomat David Bruce was planning to leave this position. By this time no formal diplomatic relations were formed between the U.S. and the People’s Republic of China. No U.S. embassy existed, no ambassador. But, on the other hand, the quarter-century long period of public diplomacy silence was over. As an example of this, President Nixon had two years earlier been the first American leader to speak with a top Chinese leader since President Franklin D. Roosevelt.³

Even though Kissinger, “the guru of U.S. China policy,” for various reasons discouraged Bush about a China mission—“For the most part you’ll be bored beyond belief,” Kissinger told him⁴—Bush wanted his move. He was convinced that the importance of Asia would rise in the world, and that the People’s Republic of China, by this time called “The Sleeping Giant,” was “the place to be.”⁵

President Ford decided to appoint Bush for the China position. Kissinger apparently accepted this decision, but Bush learned soon, as David Bruce had done before him, that it was hard to get any detailed information from Kissinger or his inner circle on the results of Kissinger’s private discussions with the representative of People’s Republic of China in Washington, D.C., Huang Zhen.⁶ Later, in the preface of *The China Diary*, Bush writes that when he reread the diary, he was “amused by some of [his] frustrations” with Kissinger. However, he also admits his great respect for the former Secretary of State and that he learned a great deal from him.⁷

³ *The China Diary* (2008), xiii-xiv; Wicker (2004), Tom Wicker, *George Herbert Walker Bush* (New York: A Lipper/Viking Book. Penguin Group, 2004), 37f.

⁴ Wicker (2004), 38.

⁵ *The China Diary* (2008), xiii.

⁶ Wicker (2004), 38f.

⁷ *The China Diary* (2008), xv.

Bush began his diary in Peking in late October 1974. We find entries from October 21, 1974 until August 22, 1975. It was published by Princeton University Press under the title *The China Diary of George H. W. Bush. The Making of a Global President*, in 2008 and edited by Jeffrey A. Engel at Texas A&M University. The diary was all in all kept until December 1975, i.e. covering Bush's just over thirteen months period as the head of the Liaison office.⁸ In his first entry on October 21, he recounted the events of the week that just had passed, his first in China.

Biographer and journalist Tom Wicker comments on Bush's and collaborator Victor Gold's pages on Bush's time in China found in the campaign autobiography *Looking Forward* from 1987, writing that they are primarily filled with "the trivia of his day-to-day personal life."⁹ Among the five "trivia" he mentions, we find the christening of Bush's daughter Dorothy. Thereby, and by the strikingly lack of religious references and coverage of spiritual issues in his biography *George Herbert Walker Bush* (2004), Wicker places himself among the authors and commentators who clearly but unfortunately show a lack of interest of this religious or spiritual dimension in Bush's private and public life. In this group, we find the three other biographers of Bush Sr., namely Timothy Naftali (*George H.W. Bush*, New York: Times Books, 2008), Nicholas King (*George Bush. A Biography*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1980), and Herbert S. Parmet (*George Bush. The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New Brunswick/London: Transaction Publishers, 2000)). Only Kjell O. Lejon has focused on the religious dimension of Bush Sr., lately in his chapter "Religion and the Presidency of George H. W. Bush" in *Religion and the American Presidency: George Washington to George W. Bush with Commentary and Primary Sources*, edited by Gaston Espinosa (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). In this chapter,

⁸ *The China Diary* (2008), xvii, 3, 395.

⁹ Wicker (2004), 39.

and in earlier works,¹⁰ Lejon gives evidence of a very clear religious dimension in the politics of Bush Sr. through an examination of the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documentations (WCPD)*.¹¹ However the mentioned chapter was written after the *China Diary* was published, why a few comments on the content in the diary should be covered from a perspective that focuses on the religious dimension.

Bush's comments on to church services

Many entries in *The China Diary* points at Bush's visits to church services. Already on the first Sunday covered in the diary, October 27, 1974, we find the following remarks:

Off to church: the Protestant service. The Bible Institute. There is a Catholic service at the Cathedral. Church service at Bible Institute was unbelievable. Beat up old house. Four old Chinese including the minister who in this instance was Presbyterian. Two others who I understand were ministers. One a Methodist, and one an Anglican. The rest of the congregation consisted of the Austrian ambassador and his family, another from the Dutch embassy, several Africans including Mrs. Akwei and her kid. All in all a congregation of about fourteen people. It was a most moving service. The hymns were the old familiar ones. Sung off an English song sheet with the Chinese voices singing the same hymns in Chinese. The service was conducted entirely in Chinese including communion. It was moving.¹²

¹⁰ See for example Kjell O. U. Lejon, »*God Bless America!*» President George Bushs religio-politiska budskap. Bibliotheca Historico-Ecclesiastica Lundensis 32. Lund: Lund University Press, 1994.

¹¹ Published by The Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Record Service, General Services Administration, Washington DC.

¹² *The China Diary* (2008), 26f. In note 55, it is noted that "Austria and China first established official diplomatic relations in May 1971, and Franz Helmut Leitner served as his county's second ambassador to Beijing from 1973 to 1974."

Even though the service was held in Chinese, Barbara Bush later commented that “we all had our own Bibles and could for the most part follow the service.”¹³

Is this trivia? Hardly. Not if you sincerely want to understand Bush as fully as possible, which includes his religious or spiritual side. He was the head of the Liaison Office, and by worshipping in that “beat up house” he set a spiritual tone on his tenure in Beijing.

There were only fourteen people participating in this his first service in China, including the four old Chinese men. It was clearly an ecumenical and international setting, consisting of at least one Chinese Methodist, one Chinese Presbyterian, one Chinese Anglican, and some foreigners, as George and Barbara Bush, a Dutch and some Africans, including the wife and child of the Ghanaian chargé d'affaires Richard Akwei. Hymns were sung simultaneously in Chinese and English. In one sense, this reflects the suffering church in China under the harsh Communist regime, but it also pictures the ecumenist and internationalist inner core of the “catholic” Protestant Christian church: a few people from four continents sharing the Word and the Holy Supper or Eucharist together. It is from various viewpoints a moving picture, and it was indeed “a most moving service” for Bush, as recorded in the diary.

Bush returned many times to the services held at this particular church, in that “beat up house.” Apparently, the expressed positive experience from the church service was not about an outer grandeur. Instead, it was a result of an inner movement. It does not seem that it was a necessary political move to go to that church, definitely not to bring a personal bible. But the Bush couple went, they brought their bibles, and they received the Holy Communion. And as said, they returned—already the following Sunday, November 3, 1974.

¹³ *The China Diary* (2008), 27, note 56.

Two weeks later, on November 17, Bush's fourth regular Sunday in China, he comments on the church service he attended that day: "They sing the most wonderful hymns. 'Nearer My God to Thee,' 'Holy, Holy, Holy.' All the old favorites." Obviously Bush has some knowledge about hymns. Also, he seems to have favorites among them. The two he mentions in this entry are classical hymns, favorites of many Christians around the world and found in many hymnbooks. The first mentioned hymn is also famous for being sung by the passengers on Titanic when it disappeared under the surface and into the depth of the Atlantic Ocean.

Another comment on the service included: "Head count—two African ladies, one African man, three Canadians, two Bushes, four Chinese in the audience, and one preacher," i.e. another picture of the "catholic" church.¹⁴

The entry the following Sunday, November 22, illustrates the order of the service. After writing that the service starts at 9:30, the place is desolate and the congregation still is small, he comments: "But it is easy to follow the familiar hymns. No sermon. Three bible readings. Communion. Lord's Prayer; the Apostles' Creed; and that's about it." This entry shows Bush's familiarity with Christian hymns and overall the traditional service liturgy, consisting of the Word, the sacrament of the Eucharist, Credo (the creed) and common prayer, in this case the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray, the Lord's prayer. He also states that the sermon is left out from the traditional order of a main Sunday service. The three readings were most likely one reading from the Old Testament, one from the epistles of the New Testament, and finally one from one of the Gospels in the New Testament. It can be said that in the traditional liturgy, the creed comes before the communion. If this was the case during the service Bush attended, we do not know, only the order in which Bush placed the parts of the service in his

¹⁴ *The China Diary* (2008), 80.

diary. What is more interesting, though, is the fact that he regularly went to church and also made some remarks on some of the services in his diary.¹⁵

Another entry is the one made after visiting the Christmas Eve service 1974. Even though the service was “all in Chinese,” it clearly made some marks on Bush. He wrote: “Glorious Christmas hymns, first-class. Strange feeling—missing one’s own family but feeling close.”¹⁶

The Bushes spent some weeks in the U.S. from mid January to February 9, 1975. After the church service on February 16, he wrote that the small church community of thirteen or fourteen people, “10 people in the audience plus three or four Chinese,” seemed “seem genuinely glad to see us back.” He further noted that a communion service was held every day, and wrote down another personal note: “It is good that we are permitted this worship here.”¹⁷ This positive attitude toward the church was shown also in the entry the following Sunday, short and precise: “Church which we wouldn’t miss—9.30...”¹⁸

On several of the following entries on Sundays it’s only mentioned that they went to church. The next time Bush covers more of what was happening in the church was on Good Friday and Easter Day, which were celebrated on the 27 and 29 of March 1975. Again, he mentions the size of the celebrating church community and contrast the few people gathered on Good Friday and the crowd on Easter Day, it “was overflowing, largely because of an African christening that went on with two little babies, the church mainly filled with Africans.” It is not known through the diary, but maybe this was a time when the thought of having Dorothy baptized in this church was brought to mind. Bush also mentions that

¹⁵ *The China Diary* (2008), 91.

¹⁶ *The China Diary* (2008), 128.

¹⁷ *The China Diary* (2008), 156.

¹⁸ *The China Diary* (2008), 170.

“the Rhodes [John Rhodes, House Minority Leader (R-Az)], Poseys and Dr. Carey” joined them for Easter service, “which was very nice.”¹⁹

A Communist funeral

On the Sunday of April 5, Bush went to the funeral of an old Communist leader, Dong Biwe, one of the founders, “the five elders” of the Communist Party. It was held in the Forbidden City and was, according to Bush, “amazing tasteful and dignified.” But he could not help to wonder “whether a (sic!) man’s family thinks there is a god.”²⁰ The following week Bush mentions that he and Barbara brought a co-worker at the Office, Henrietta Morris, to their church for Sunday service on April 13. She worked at the administrative pool and had recently had arrived to Beijing.²¹

The first baptism of an American in China since 1949: Dorothy Bush

A couple of months later the first baptism of an American in China since the revolution in 1949 took place. The person baptized was Dorothy Bush, the daughter of George and George Bush, who was at the age of fifteen. Barbara explains that the baptism had been put off four times, “due to deaths, politics, long distances and floods (literally).” She continues: “This was hard to explain for ourselves, much less the Chinese.”²² Bush’s remarks on that occasion reads:

The big thing that day-Dorothy was baptized at our little Chinese church. The ministers were extremely happy and smiling-pleasant, wonderful. It was very special. There were six guardian group people taping and flashing pictures of the ceremony, not knowing what was going on really. But we

¹⁹ *The China Diary* (2008), 226f., 180.

²⁰ *The China Diary* (2008), 240, inkl. note 78.

²¹ *The China Diary* (2008), 249.

²² Quoted in *The China Diary* (2008), 240, inkl. note 56.

were very happy that the Chinese agreed, after they consulted in a meeting, to baptize Doro. They wondered why we were doing it. Bar explanation that we wanted the family together and hadn't been able to do it. A very special day, an occasion.

A frequent worshipper

The China Diary covers six more Sundays, from July 6 until August 17. Five out of those Bush went to church. On the sixth, July 20, he was out of Beijing, on a diplomatic trip to China's northwest and therefore not able to attend his "home church."

All in all, we notice that Bush documents twenty-four times of church services from late October, 1974 until Aug. 22, 1975 in his *China Diary* (twenty-five if we include May 4, 1975, when George wrote that Barbara went alone to the church service). Most of these are included in the Index of Jeffrey A. Engels edited version of *The China Diary* (under "church services, Bushes at"), but four church visits recorded by Bush are not (five visits if we include when Barbara went alone).²³ This is most likely a simple mistake, but still noteworthy. In addition, Bush made no entries on some Sundays, f. ex. during his stay in the U.S. Jan. 16–Feb. 9, 1975. Some of the Sundays he did not go to church in Beijing, he was traveling, as shown in the example above.²⁴ This means that the Bushes

²³ *The China Diary* (2008), 51. In the diary church visits are mentioned on Oct. 27 (p. 26), Nov. 3 (p. 51), Nov. 17 (p. 80), Nov. 24 (p. 91), Dec. 1 (p. 109) and Dec. 24 (p. 128) in 1974, and on Feb. 16 (p. 156), Feb. 23 (p. 170), March 2 (p. 182), March 9 (p. 190), March 16 (p. 205), March 23 (p. 218), March 28 (Good Friday, p. 226), March 30 (Easter Day, p. 226f), April 13 (249), April 27 (p. 268), June 1 (p. 305), June 15 (p. 325), June 29 (p. 340), July 6 (George went alone. Barbara was in Shanghai (p. 352), July 13 (p. 363), July 27 (p. 369), Aug. 3 (p. 378), and Aug. 17 (p. 389) in 1975. On May 4, 1975 (p. 276), only Barbara went to church. March 9, May 4, June 1 and Aug. 17 of 1975 are not included in the Index, p. 504.

²⁴ As Nov. 10, 1974, when he spent all day in the city of Tianjin (p. 66f), He went on a twelve day trip in Dec. 1974 (p. 113), recovered from a cold on Dec. 29 (136). He only has one entry in Jan. 1975, traveled to the U.S. on Jan. 16 and returned to China at midnight on Sunday Feb. 9 (p. 145, 148). On May 18 and June 8, 1975 he went on a trip to the Tombs and the Wall (p. 293). No entry on May 25, 1975 (p. 296). On July 20, 1975 he was on a trip to China's northwest (p. 366)

basically went to church on a weekly basis during the period covered in *The China Diary*. This is definitely notable in any thorough and scholarly description of Bush and his life.

Reflections on the China experience by President Bush

Bush later on, as President, reflected on his time as a diplomat in China. In an interview on Chinese television, he declared: “Our work here was a source of great personal satisfaction, a happy, challenging time in our lives. And we actually went to church here; indeed, our daughter was baptized in our faith here.”²⁵

And when revisiting his church in China he declared: “Our family has always felt that church is the place to seek guidance and seek strength and peace...This church, in a sense, was our home away from home...the important thing is that the feeling is the same, the feelings of being in the spirit of Jesus Christ.”²⁶

The entries in *The China Diary* along with his official comments on his experiences in China as President of the U.S., along with many, many religious references in the presidential material overall, show clearly that Bush stands not only in a tradition which stresses the importance of Christian faith, Christian liturgy and Christian hymns, but also in a sort of Evangelical tradition, in which you could speak openly about your faith and participation in Christian services. He clearly expresses an appreciation when people are joining him to his Chinese church and even brings other people to this church.

The relatively short tenure in Beijing, less than fourteenth months, was important in Bush’s overall outlook. In his preface to *The China Diary*, Bush states that the decision to go to China “profoundly changed [his] life.” Also, that it “would forever change [his] view of the world.”²⁷ He has returned to China more

²⁵ *WCPD*, 1989, 250.

²⁶ *WCPD*, 1989, 249.

²⁷ *The China Diary* (2008), xiii.

than twenty times after leaving the White House in 1993, the twenty second time as late as in August of 2008, almost 84 years old, then serving as the honorary captain of the American team at the Summer Olympic Games.²⁸ The imprint of the China experience is evident, both politically and spiritually, and the entries are congenial with, for example, the very clear religious dimension in the politics of George H. W. Bush as President of the United States.

²⁸ *The China Diary* (2008), xv.